

Low-carb study draws spotlight to low-profile Tulane professor



Advocate staff photo by JOHN McCUSKER -- Tulane's Dr. Lydia Bazzano Last week the headlines arrived for Bazzano's latest contribution to dietary science: the news that a low-carbohydrate diet can actually produce greater weight loss than a low-fat diet. National media, attuned to the modern obsession with health and fitness, pounced immediately. The New York Times and USA Today, Time magazine and NPR all picked up the story.

BY TYLER BRIDGES

Special to The Advocate

Dr. Lydia Bazzano has treated patients and conducted clinical studies at Tulane University's School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine since 2005. Publishing on topics like ulcerative colitis and fiber intake, she's had a mostly quiet career.

Until last week.

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On Tuesday morning, Bazzano awoke to find 100 emails in her inbox, not the usual 10 or so.

Among them: The Los Angeles Times and public radio stations in San Francisco and Los Angeles wanted her time.

“This is all a little overwhelming,” Bazzano said as she got off the phone after arranging another interview with CBS Radio for the following day.

It is all taking some getting used to.

“I should have worn a little more makeup,” Bazzano said, learning that The Advocate wanted to snap her photo.

On Wednesday, she stayed at home so she wouldn’t have to answer the phone at her office. “I couldn’t get any work done,” she said.

Bazzano, 39, grew up in Metairie wanting to be a scientist. She aced Newman High School, Tulane undergrad and Tulane Medical School. After a residency at Harvard, she returned home and dived into work as an epidemiologist at Tulane, where she has authored or co-authored several dozen studies.

“I’ve had some interest in my work on beans and fruits and vegetables,” she said in her 20th-floor Canal Street office but then paused. “The majority of my work is boring to most people.”

Bazzano’s latest report is not boring to anyone who cares about their weight — which of course explains the flood of attention. The study came with the imprimatur of being financed by the National Institutes of Health and published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*.

The study featured 148 overweight people from metro New Orleans. Half of them followed a low-carbohydrate diet while the other half ate the kind of low-fat diet that health authorities have long advocated.

After a year, people in the low-carb group had lost 8 more pounds than those in the low-fat group. They also lost more body fat because they gained lean muscle mass and also reduced the chances of having a heart attack in the next decade.

“A lot of people out there think low-carb diets are unhealthy,” Bazzano said. “That’s just not the case.”

She laughed, adding, “I know the pasta people won’t be happy.”

Then her husband, Jose Alvarez, called. He wanted to know what time Fox 8 News would broadcast its interview with Bazzano from earlier in the day. “I’ll find out and text you,” she said to him.

Bazzano began organizing the study in 2007. Over the seven years that it ran, she changed her own diet. “I eat less carbs and select them more carefully,” she said. “I lost my post-pregnancy weight on a low-carb diet.”

Her lunch on Tuesday: tuna fish and whole-wheat crackers with a bit of mayonnaise (which had unsaturated fat, the good kind).

Between interviews, Bazzano’s regular work as a researcher continues. One day this week, she sat at the head of a conference table with a group of medical and public health students who meet regularly to discuss published research.

“Catherine, did you read my study?” she asked one resident.

“I read the New York Times story,” Catherine replied.

“Yes, there’s been a lot of attention,” Bazzano said.

Bazzano turned to the study results. She reeled off facts and figures about HDL (high-density lipoprotein cholesterol, the good kind), LDL (low-density lipoprotein cholesterol, the bad kind) and CRP (C-reactive protein — a lower level is good). On the lighter side, there was some discussion of how all this might actually apply in a place like New Orleans.

“There are no no-carb restaurants in New Orleans,” she said. “If there was a low-carb king cake, that I didn’t know about.”

Soon, Bazzano was back on unfamiliar terrain, standing for a photo. She had to be told to leave her key ring and coffee to the side.

A minute later, she had a question for the photographer: “Smile or a serious face?”

“Smile!” she was told. “You’re happy!”

She smiled gamely.

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